

Paul Dooley Project - Part 3 - Interview

Transcription

(Perfect Couple, 1979)

TV STORE ONLINE: Before I ask you about making **PERFECT COUPLE [1979]** with Robert Altman, I wanted to see if you could tell me about the recording of your 1961 LP for the Strand record label, *Paul Dooley: Booked Solid*?

DOOLEY: I was doing that stand-up act for three or four years.

TV STORE ONLINE: Where was it recorded it? It says on the LP cover that it was recorded live in a club...

DOOLEY: Yes, we recorded it upstairs at the Duplex in Greenwich Village. It's just a little night club.

TV STORE ONLINE: So where did the idea come from with the reading of the all the books live on stage?

DOOLEY: One of my routines comes from reading the audience a fairy tale as told through a Czechoslovakian double talk. As the character, I start reading it to the audience and say to them, "*Oh! You don't know Czechoslovakian? Let me translate it for you!*" It turns out that the character doesn't know the language well at all, so when he translates it, he mixes up the nouns and it was all done to comic effect. I couldn't walk out onto a stage with just one book, because I would've gotten stuck with it, so I would walk out with a few different books, put them down on a chair, and use them as segways into some of my other routines. It was just a gimmick that I could use to kick off some of the other routines. Back then, I wasn't a joke teller on stage. All of my bits were like three or four minutes long, just like how Bob Newhart used to work.

TV STORE ONLINE: The high pitch cartoonish British Dandy voice that you use in the Shakespeare in Avon bit on the LP is pretty funny...

DOOLEY: I just did that in general. I didn't take the voice from something I had seen. Some of the stuff on *Booked Solid* doesn't really work, because there are some visual gags and those don't translate because you couldn't see them. There's that bit where my character stabs his father-in-law by accident and then turns around and stabs his bride by mistake. You can't see that happen when you're listening to the record album...laughing

TV STORE ONLINE: Right, I caught that. I had to think about that for a second after I first heard it because you do throw that line in there about your character needing new glasses when your character puts away his

knife...

DOOLEY: Right. The line was, "*Both has betrayed how soon life passes. I must get new glasses...*"

TV STORE ONLINE: I just took a look at that fun video on your official website where you parody Bob Dylan's Subterranean Homesick Blues music video...

DOOLEY: I did that as an old man, and I hold up those cards like Dylan but mine tell you the names of all of the diseases I've had...I hired an actor to play Allen Ginsberg and stand in the background even.

TV STORE ONLINE: Really quick...One more question about *Booked Solid*...One of the books that you mention on the recording is called "Thermo Dynamics For Swingin' Lovers" was that made up or was there a book actually called that?

DOOLEY: That was just invented. I had a writer who wrote much of that act with me named David Panich. David wrote for *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* years later, and he was a genius. I learned so much about writing comedy from him. Before I had met him... I knew that I could execute jokes but I didn't think I that I could write. All the Shakespeare stuff, and the Czechoslovakian fairy tale were all his ideas. When we worked together... Neither of us had any money. He was a school teacher, he hadn't gone professional yet. While we were writing together, I wasn't paying him anything. I guess he believed in me, because he stood by me. I always told him that once I made it, I'd pay him. So when I finally got onto *The Tonight Show* I paid him half of my salary from that.

TV STORE ONLINE: Let's talk about PERFECT COUPLE....How did that project come to you?

DOOLEY: We had finished *A WEDDING* (1978). I went off and one day I was reading an article in *Variety* about the Altman's new film, and in the article it said that I was playing the lead role. He hadn't even told me about it...*laughing*

TV STORE ONLINE: I've read in my research that Altman was originally considering Sandy Dennis to play opposite you in PERFECT COUPLE originally...

DOOLEY: That's not true. Originally Altman had wanted Shelley Duvall for that part, but she had already signed on to do *THE SHINING* [1980] with Stanley Kubrick. So he used Marta Heflin, who as you know, has just passed away recently. Marta had a small role in *A WEDDING*, so I had already worked with her. I had to lose twenty pounds to play "Alex Theodopoulos" in PERFECT COUPLE. We shot the film in Los Angeles.

TV STORE ONLINE: In taking to you before....The critics hated Robert Altman for the most part, and while they disliked PERFECT COUPLE across the board, the critics seemed to always point out how wonderful your performance in the film was...

DOOLEY: I got some great notices....All the critics hated it, but there was one guy at the time that wrote for a magazine here in Los Angeles that placed it on his list of the Ten Best Films Of 1979 though.

TV STORE ONLINE: Is it possible...To look at a film and disregard the conventions of the storyline and only watch it for the performances? Can a film be considered great only on the performances of its actors alone or does it have to have certain key elements to be considered such?

DOOLEY: I don't know if it matters really. The critics that liked PERFECT COUPLE somewhat said that it was Altman's most accessible film. Altman didn't like his films to have happy endings. I mean, he assassinated one of his lead characters at the end of NASHVILLE [1975]. He had that European sensibility, and that really showed up in his work. There were many critics that pointed out how PERFECT COUPLE ended, in that the two characters ended up at the Hollywood Bowl together happily ever after. Altman said to me at the end of the shoot, "This picture has a happy ending, but at least I got to kill your character's sister off". (Laughing)

TV STORE ONLINE: Speaking of the Hollywood Bowl...PERFECT COUPLE also begins there as well...What all of that Hollywood Bowl stuff at the beginning of the film shot under the aspices of real rain or was that all just movie rain?

DOOLEY: We were the only ones that were getting rained on. It was all movie rain.

TV STORE ONLINE: That opening sequence just goes on and on... It never stops raining...

DOOLEY: It was fun. There were some fun bits in there...That whole thing with Alex's sun room was really funny.

TV STORE ONLINE: Was the idea of the parallel couple throughout the film something that Altman just came up with?

DOOLEY: Yes, they were supposed to be the perfect couple and Marta and I were supposed to be the imperfect couple. It was Altman's idea. The beauty of it was that by the end of the film, the audience sees that they actually aren't the perfect couple, we are.

TV STORE ONLINE: So how did you find the character of Alex?

DOOLEY: He was just me. I was playing myself. I was taught a handful of Greek phrases by Altman's script girl. She had worked with him on many films and she was Greek.

TV STORE ONLINE: In both **A WEDDING** and **PERFECT COUPLE** there seems to be a focus on the struggle between the classes. Was that something that you noticed while you were working on those films with Altman? Why do you think he was interested in that notion?

DOOLEY: Alex was trying to get away from his family. It appeared to Alex that the people in the rock band were loose and easy going, and his father was a dictator. The reason why he was attracted to Marta's character was because she was so different from any other woman that he would've met had he not went to the dating service. It was Altman's ideas to make Ted Neely appear to be no different than Alex's father. He was just as much of a dictator as Alex's father. That was the idea behind it. Both Alex and Sheila were both under the thumb of someone and they both wanted to get away. I really enjoyed working on **PERFECT COUPLE** because I really loved all of that amazing music that you get to hear.

TV STORE ONLINE: Yet, both Alex and Shelia are outsiders within their own environments...

DOOLEY: That's correct. They both feel out of place in their environments. Each is stuck in a place where they don't want to be. Someone is forcing rules upon them. In some ways, both Alex and Shelia are losers because they've allowed themselves to be treated a certain way.

TV STORE ONLINE: There are some incredible jokes in **PERFECT COUPLE**....Was there a lot of improvisation while you were shooting?

DOOLEY: Yes, there was quite a bit of ad-libbing in **PERFECT COUPLE**...

TV STORE ONLINE: What about some of those funny one-liners that come at the front of the film....The stuff about the Mafia hood, "*There's a hood under the hood...*" or "*All the houses of the neighborhood in Chinatown all looking alike..*"

DOOLEY: That Mafia joke is an old one, and Altman came up with the line about Chinatown.

TV STORE ONLINE: Can you talk about shooting that amazing scene where you go up in that elevator with Marta and you have to kiss her...

DOOLEY: Sure. I thought that was very clever of Altman. That freight elevator was in the same building where we shot the scenes of Alex at work in his father's antique store. So the antique store was on the lower level and then the rock group's loft was on the floor above that.

TV STORE ONLINE: The tension in the scene where you decide to kiss Marta is wonderful...

DOOLEY: Yeah, it was fun. The whole thing of her trying to shut his head in the elevator door and then that awkwardness that came from the moment. It seemed just endless. I think we traveled like four floors in that scene. That was actually the only time I've ever kissed someone on film too.

TV STORE ONLINE: Going back to the what the critics said about **PERFECT COUPLE**....Janet Maslin pointed out in her review of the film how incredible that scene is in the film with your character and Sheila as he's laying on that hospital gurney after she's just struck you over the head with that fireplace poker....

DOOLEY: It was an interesting scene. The non-sequitur was the best part of it.

TV STORE ONLINE: Altman creates visual non-sequiters in his films as well...In **PERFECT COUPLE**, when Alex decides to chase after Sheila after she's left to go on tour with the band....He's standing in his father's antique store, he decides he needs to go after Sheila, and Altman holds the shoot and then pans over and zooms in slowly on that sign that reads, "Do Not Enter"....

DOOLEY: Altman had a tendency to do clever things like that. He liked to finish scenes that features living things with material things. He did that all of the time, and everything he chooses to look at always makes a comment on what you've just seen. Altman was at his best when he was doing visual things. He was a true visual artist. Just go back and look at *McCABE & MRS. MILLER* [1971]. His weakness was that he didn't like happy endings. The endings of many of his films just weren't effective. He told me once, *"If two people go to see one of my movies, and at the end of it, they leave the theater and can't agree with each other about what my movie was about, I'm totally happy."* He loved the idea of ambiguity.

TV STORE ONLINE: The scenes with Alex and actress Ann Ryerson as "Skye 147 Veterinarian " are pretty funny as well...When we're shown Alex and Skye out to dinner and Alex has changed from appearing as if he's a very uptight business man to almost looking like a new age hippie of sorts we get the sense that Alex is really searching for something...

DOOLEY: I think what that really was, he was really thinking that he was too old for her. I think he went and picked that outfit out because he wanted to put on an appearance for her.

TV STORE ONLINE: When you were cast in **PERFECT COUPLE**...Were you confident in your abilities to carry an entire film on your shoulders considering it was something you hadn't yet done in your career?

DOOLEY: It wasn't a problem for me. I was delighted when he gave me the role of Alex. I completely threw myself into that role. It was one of the best experiences of my career. When people ask me about PERFECT COUPLE, I tell them that I really liked Alex because he was in every scene in the film...*laughing*

TV STORE ONLINE: All these years later...PERFECT COUPLE has seemed to have disappeared off the radar of those that consider themselves fans of Altman's work. It seems like when his work is discussed people only talk about the films he made up from 1971-1975 and they skip over everything else and then they pick back up at SHORT CUTS [1993]....Why do you think some his films like A WEDDING [1978], PERFECT COUPLE [1979], H.E.A.L.T.H.[1980], FOOL FOR LOVE [1985] or STREAMERS [1983] are so overlooked and ignored?

DOOLEY: I don't really know. You'll notice that the same thing happens when they do retrospectives of his work too. Maybe, it's because they haven't been discovered yet by the right audience? McCABE & MRS. MILLER for example, when that came out it wasn't well received. People thought it was too murky and too weird. Then over time people discovered it and now it's included on the list of one of his greatest works.

